

## **ForeWord Interview, Jeff Sherratt**

### **When did you start reading, and what did you like to read as a kid?**

The first thing I remember reading was my first grade primer, *Fun with Dick and Jane*, "See Spot run. Run Spot run," and all of that. But seriously, as a child I loved reading. I got hooked on the Hardy Boys mysteries at an early age and later went on to devour all of the Hammett and Chandler mysteries. In school I read the classics and fell in love with Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, arguably the greatest mystery written.

### **When you were growing up did you have books in your home?**

My mother read a lot of popular fiction of the day, Steinbeck, Hemingway, and other extraordinary writers of the forties. But my dad loved movies and took his entire family the Leimert Theater a couple times a week. Television was nonexistent when I was a small child in the mid to late forties and going to the movies twice a week was normal family entertainment. The movies we call Film Noir today were the "B" pictures back then, second features of a double bill. Great films such as *Out of the Past* might be running with a musical comedy like *Singing in the Rain*. Even as a kid I liked the "B" movies better. But to answer the question, no there were not a lot of books on the shelves at our house.

### **When did you think about becoming a writer? Was there someone who got you interested in writing?**

In high school I wasn't much of a student, too many other distractions, but I knew I could write. I remember writing a book report for my freshman English class on Sir Walter Scott's *The Talisman*. At first my teacher wanted to fail me because she felt that I must have plagiarized the work. Too good for someone like me to have written. Later in my adult life when I was a partner in a political public relations firm, I wrote a lot of spin about the candidates we handled. That was my first experience writing fiction. But lurking in the back of my mind was the thought that someday I'd write mystery novels. Out of boredom, I guess, after selling my business, I gave it a try. I held no illusions of having my manuscript published. I wrote my first book as a Christmas gift for my family. With their encouragement, I decided to write seriously and go through the rigmarole of trying to get the book published. I took a writer's extension course at UCLA, and my instructor, Clare Carmichael pushed me beyond what I thought I could do. That book was not published, but I had the bug. It wasn't until I hired Mike Sirota, editor extraordinaire, to work with me while writing *The Brimstone Murders* that my work became professional enough to be published.

### **How do you write? Do you have a daily routine? What's good about it? What do you hate about it?**

Four questions: I'll lump the first two together. To actually finish an 80,000 word novel it's imperative that you have a routine. Write at a certain time every day with a set number of hours, and have a goal as to how many pages or words you are going to finish before shutting down the computer. Hemingway said he wrote one page every day and therefore had a completed novel ready to send to his publisher every year. Of course, his one page was perfect. Next question above: I love writing. I have so much fun that I feel guilty doing it. Because it's so enjoyable I don't think of it as work. Sometimes, to assuage my guilt, I get up and clean the garage, or something. There is nothing I can say that I hate about spending time pounding out my stories...well, except when my computer crashes, or maybe when I spill my coffee all over the keyboard, stuff like that.

### **Any particular story to tell concerning the writing of this book?**

*The Brimstone Murders* is set in Southern California in the 1970. The protagonist, Jimmy O'Brien, a young and struggling criminal defense lawyer, has an office in a suburb of Los Angeles called Downey. In my book I give accurate, concise descriptions of the physical area as it had been at that time, using real locations such as restaurants, buildings and streets. The setting comes alive, almost a character, an integral part of the plot. Recently I received an email from someone who had lived in Downey during the 1970s. She mentioned how much she enjoyed my book, how it brought back memories of her childhood

as she revisited locations in Downey. But she also said that people who had never been to Downey would enjoy the characters and the story but probably wouldn't appreciate it as much as she did, because of the nostalgia factor. I sent her an email of thanks, then opened my next reader's email. It was from a woman in St. Louis. Sure enough, she loved the book, too. And she added that she had never been to Southern California, but enjoyed roaming around Downey and Southern California with Jimmy O'Brien. I thought that was funny.

**What's some good advice that you've received concerning writing? What's some advice that you could offer young writers?**

Over the years I've received a tremendous amount of advice concerning my writing, good advice from the professionals I've worked with like Mike and Clare. My family, my friends, and even business acquaintances have commented on my writing. I belong to several writers' and Internet groups where we exchange ideas and thoughts regarding our work. I seek out comments, read every review, and listen closely to what my readers have to say. I think young writers should do the same, but the inexperienced writer has to know the difference between good advice and hokum, and that takes study.

**What are you working on at the moment?**

The next Jimmy O'Brien mystery novel, of course.

**What are you reading?**

*The Long Embrace* by Judith Freeman. The tag line reads, "Raymond Chandler and the woman he loved." I can't get enough of that guy. And Freeman's book is excellent. Through Chandler's letters she ties to make sense of his personal life. Chandler was a bizarre genius, to say the least.

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